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# Post-school transition-preparation for high school students with disabilities: A vital issue for Special Education

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## Why is the post-secondary transition of high school students with disabilities so important?

Students with disabilities face many barriers and issues in their schooling years; and perhaps one factor that impacts most on how they succeed into adulthood is the transition program run by the school to bridge the gap between schooling and work, further education and independent or semi-independent living (Carter, Trainor, Cakiroglu, Swedeen, Owens, 2010). For these students Wheman, (2006) includes the achievement of “completing school, gaining employment, participating in postsecondary education, contributing to a household, participating in the community, and experiencing satisfactory personal and social relationships” (p. 72).

In 2011 The National Disability Service reported 150,000 young people with disabilities enrolled in mainstream or special schools in Australia. The disabilities that these young people have cover a wide range of impairments and frequently result in difficulties with essential activities such as living skills, independence and mobility. Students with disabilities lag noticeably behind students without disabilities in regards to school finishing, employment rates and postsecondary education rates (Fleming & Fairweather, 2012; Kohler & Field, 2003).

Students with disabilities also make up half the people who are unemployed but who want to work (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2000), which is a concerning pattern for parents, teachers and the youths themselves.

This pattern can be reduced to a certain degree with appropriate and dedicated education towards the

individual needs of the disabled student (Hendricks & Wehman, 2009); however, as research noted in this paper suggests, many schools struggle to achieve the desired outcomes when it comes to the successful transitioning of young disabled youth into the post-schooling life. For example, Levine, Marder and Wagner's (2004) study found that parents were dissatisfied with the transition services their children received, citing lack of information, lack of availability, transportation difficulties, scheduling conflicts, and services of poor quality; while Rosey (2008) noted an inconsistency in relation to accessing employment, making the system confusing and adding further barriers for young people with disabilities. Further, the National Council on Disability (2007) established that students with disabilities are faced with fragmented services, limited program accessibility, and training that too often focuses on low-paying jobs.

Within the outcome-focused curriculum of senior schooling in Australia (e.g. VCE, HSC) aligning individualised learning programs required for students with disabilities is extremely difficult and so it is no surprise that their school finishing rates are lower than those of students without disabilities, both in Australia and overseas. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (2009) reported that of the 305,900 young adults (20-24 years) who had a disability or a restrictive long term health condition, almost one-quarter (76,200 people) were categorised as having an education restriction (for example, needing time off from regular classes or requiring special tuition). Of this group only about half (53%) had attained Year 12.

In developed countries there is an expectation that everyone has the equal right to education and

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employment, but this is not being demonstrated in the graduation rates of students with disabilities (Kortering, Braziel, & McClannon, 2010). Further, young people with disabilities still require support post schooling to obtain levels of success in regards to economy, well-being and independence. In a recent study by Fleming and Fairweather (2012), the authors describe transition programs for youth with disabilities as "inconsistent in application and effectiveness" (p. 71). Clearly, despite all of the legislation, mandates and research there has been little improvement since the 1996 US Department of Education found that 51% of young people with disabilities leaving school in the 1994/1995 year required further education services in order to finish their basic secondary education and even more worrying, 80% needed additional individual guidance to obtain employment, further education and independent living goals. Despite modest improvements evidenced during the last two decades, unemployment, underemployment, and segregated employment still characterise the vocational landscape for many young adults with disabilities.

Sadly, it may be concluded that without effective and meaningful transition programs and experiences, disabled youth will remain a group of un-empowered, marginalised and impoverished people.

### **What are the main barriers to students with disabilities entering the post-schooling options?**

#### **Dropping out of schooling**

Pyle and Wexler (2012) noted that high school dropout rates are a huge barrier to the progress of students with disabilities finding 65% of those with learning disabilities failed to complete their schooling. Interviews with some of these students have shown a frustration with the low-level and irrelevant instruction that they received in special education classes. Cobb and Alwell's (2009) major systemic review identified a primary concern in the "perceived lack of efficacy of special education curricula noted by numerous participants" (p. 78). The researchers further commented that these students with special needs would benefit from less homework and more time on meta-cognitive strategy instruction (learning to learn) as well as a focus on the students' interests and talents. Unfortunately some of these individuals may be the victims of the crowded, outcomes-oriented curriculum where teachers are pressured to ensure all target material is covered, rather than differentiation for all (Plank & Condliffe, 2013). There can also be a tendency to reduce the amount of work that a student with a disability has, rather than to stretch them to reach their full potential through a different method of instruction.

The challenge is to have teachers overcome the restrictions of time and curriculum pressures to be creative and allow for real-life assignments that stretch all students to achieve regardless of learning abilities.

#### **Internal challenges of disability**

Another barrier to effective transitioning to post-schooling life of youth with disabilities is the nature of the disability itself. Gilbert and Hay (2004) state that having a disability challenges a person's well-being and coping skills. Entering into post-secondary education or the workforce is already daunting enough to students without disabilities, and this is without the social, emotional and organisational barriers that further complicate the life of some disabled youth. Winn & Hay (2009) cite the study by Braitman and colleagues in 1995 which explored the barriers to employment that faced unemployed youth and found that individuals with a disability had less motivation about work, less effective time management skills, were less able to deal with criticism, and had difficulties showing initiative and concentration on the job. Side effects of medication and physical health problems also produced barriers to employment for youth with disabilities. The study also hypothesised that effective transition programs that are targeted to individual's particular needs, could reduce some of these barriers such as poor time-management, communication skills and ability to deal with criticism.

#### **External challenges of disability**

A major area of difficulty described in the literature suggests that if a student with a disability is able to overcome their internal barriers, they may face external ones from the community and workforce, which then work to negatively reinforce their internal conflicts. Kidd, Sloane and Ferk (2002) found that barriers to employment for school leavers with a disability include the perceived negative attitudes of some supervisors and co-workers. This finding suggests that even with effective transitioning, young people with disabilities may still find barriers in their workplace environment. There needs to be a focus on finding meaningful employment that is also engaging, and achievable for the individual with his/her specific disability. Employers also need to alter their preconceived ideas of disability to a notion that all individuals have ability and can contribute to their workforce (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2005; Winn & Hay, 2009). These individuals can achieve work skills if trained appropriately (Wehman, 2006). Janiga and Costenbader (2002) also found that there was a need for students with disabilities to learn how to advocate for themselves and how to seek out services included in their transition programs. Janiga and Costenbader go on to comment that "the skills needed

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to be successful in postsecondary educational and vocational settings, such as self-awareness, awareness of appropriate career options, and the ability to engage in self-advocacy when necessary, take many years to develop” (p. 465).

## Unrealistic perceptions

Hitchings and Retish (2000) found that unrealistic perceptions were also an issue. Many high school and college students lacked an accurate perception of their disability and its potential impact upon career aspirations as well as their actual ability to perform the required tasks. While Kortering and Braziel (2010) found that many of these students had unrealistic career ambitions or no ambitions, and those that did have realistic ambitions, were usually unsuccessful in gaining the necessary education or training required for these jobs. There is a delicate balance to maintain in keeping motivation and self-esteem high, when having to continually explain that to be an astronaut one needs to have a complex understanding of mathematics and physics.

## Who is affected by this issue and how?

Many parents and teachers are concerned with the adequacy of post-school options (Hay & Winn, 2005). It is a terrifying prospect for some families to have their children with disabilities, out in the adult world and no longer supervised and supported by teachers. Every parent wants his/her child to be happy and successful in life, and this is more difficult for youth with disabilities.

According to Lamb and McKenzie (2001), these individuals are three times less likely to find full-time employment. This produces stress for parents who not only have to continue looking for jobs for their children, but also support them economically in the mean time.

Parents of a child with a disability are also disadvantaged economically and career-wise. Anderson, Larson, Lakin, and Kwak (2002) reported from data gathered in the USA National Health Interview Survey that over 40% of these parents had rejected a job offer or promotion because of their child's disability, 29% had altered work hours, 36% had reduced their work hours and 17% had quit work entirely. These statistics not only have an effect on the family's economy but on the wider economy too. A healthy economy comes about by having more people working productively in the workplace. This could be improved by better training for youth with disabilities to enter the workforce.

People with a disability are more likely to be working in poorly paid jobs or experiencing long-term unemployment in comparison to workers who are not disabled (Gilbert & Hay, 2004). For individuals with

disabilities, not having adequate employment when their peers do, can be shattering to their sense of self-worth and feeling of participation in society. It can lead to disengagement from society. Gannon and Nolan, (2007) found that people with a disability have much lower levels of social inclusion compared with the rest of the population, and also that having a disability seriously impacts on an individual's ability to earn a living and be free of poverty. In fact being unemployed leads to a negative psychological attitude and can impact on self-esteem, confidence and work attitude (Sciulli, De Menezes & Viera, 2011). All of these negative effects are justifiable reasons for educators, and society in general, focusing on creating a more effective transition for young people with disabilities into adulthood.

## How can we address the issue of students with disabilities transitioning successfully to the workplace after high school?

Many students with disabilities meet such a range of problems after school that many lose hope of achieving meaningful and competitive employment in the community (Dewson, Aston, Ritchie & Dyson, 2004). In building an appropriate transition program, schools should clearly identify and target the needs of students with disabilities before they reach the last stages of their education (Winn & Hay, 2009). Hay and Winn (2005) suggest that in order to enhance the students' skills and long-term learning goals, school-based vocational preparation and orientation needs to be fed back into the classroom learning, not occur as just an add-on. That is to say, current curriculum practices need to be changed so that programs such as work experience are targeted towards the individual, then incorporated back into the curriculum for future learning when the students return.

Eagar, Green, Gordon, Owen, Masso, and Williams (2006) discovered that the capacity to effectively manage activities associated with daily living was the single best predictor for success in future work and transition to work programs for people with disabilities. Although a focus on training, work, independence and development of life skills for students with a disability may be more expensive initially, evidence suggests that there are significant financial benefits to all state-holders including the individual, family and community (Stancliffe & Lakin, 2005). The Vocational Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) program in Victoria has proved very successful at the author's school for students with disabilities.

There are three levels of the program: Foundation, Intermediate, and Senior, with most students with disabilities able to complete the Foundation level of the certificate. The program focuses on four areas

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(literacy, numeracy, personal development, and work related skills) as well as requiring students to complete a TAFE certificate in their desired fields. Students learn how to fill out forms, send letters, budget, follow written instructions, and how to behave safely in the workplace among other things. Anecdotal evidence shows that the students enjoy their learning and feel a sense of achievement and exuberance that they can stand up on the stage and participate in the school's presentation night, knowing that they have been able to complete Year 12, even though it is not the VCE. Dedicated integration and VCAL staff have regular meetings with parents of students with disabilities to look at future training and career options, with all students placed somewhere in their first year after graduation. Who follows this up though in the years afterwards is still a question to be answered. With so many disjointed corporations, there is not one central place to which parents can turn.

It has been suggested by several researchers (Carter, Trainor, Cakiroglu, Swedeen & Owens, 2010; Cobb & Alwell, 2009) that in order to improve the postsecondary employment and education outcomes for students with disabilities, schools should be attempting the following:

- Facilitate graduation from high school for students with disabilities
- Incorporate vocational education classes that focus on job-specific instruction, during the last two years of high school.
- Provide transition planning for students in terms of education, workplace and personal development.
- Provide links to paid work experience in the community during the last two years of high school.
- Continue to link in with community workplaces and training facilities after students with disabilities have graduated from high school.

Cooney and Hay (2005) suggest that students with a disability need to be shown how to use the Internet, carry out job searches and how to enhance their employment options. They also need to be made aware of safe workplace issues, knowing when to ask for help, safe use of medicine and budgeting skills (Winn and Hay, 2009).

It is the author's opinion that the VCAL program fulfils all those requirements mentioned previously, if implemented properly. What is more encouraging is that Cavallaro, Foley, Saunders and Bowman (2005) found that participation rates of people with a disability in VET (Vocational Education and Training) programs in Australia has almost doubled in recent years. VET programs run in tandem with the VCAL program, as the TAFE component for some students. With participation in an appropriate VET program, 51%

of individuals with a disability gained some level of employment (Lamb & McKenzie, 2001).

However, it is worth noting these numbers may diminish with the recent change in policy from the Victorian State Government that has significantly cut funding to TAFE institutions with many courses being cancelled.

Winn and Hay (2009) suggest from their research, that programming in schools should be both student and goal-focused, use varied instructional approaches, and utilise different learning environments in order to achieve high quality education and transition into the community. This cannot be done in the structured and highly outcome-focused senior curriculum programs of VCE or HSC in Australia, but needs to be carried out in differentiated programs such as VCAL or school-focused special education programs. Furthermore, to reduce carer concerns and anxiety, the authors suggest that educators need to inform students and their parents about what services and benefits are available post schooling. This could be done during round-table discussions, or a transition information folder with a list of services. Information needs to be useful, relevant and not overwhelming to either the student or the parents.

Winn and Hay (2009) suggest that the dichotomous nature of disability programs between school and post-school is also an issue with successful transition of youth with disabilities into the workforce. They recommend that universities prepare teachers with in-service education programs to increase knowledge of post-school options for individuals with disabilities. They further identified a need for a new type of professional who can work across the school, transition and post-secondary work environments. This last point is integral to minimise the chance of students 'falling through the cracks' once they have completed their schooling. In terms of the author's individual experience, in-service education programs while at university would have been useful rather than having to learn how to 'sink or swim' in the workplace when faced with the issue of transition for these students. There is a range of different services that enable post-schooling training for students with disabilities (e.g. Futures for Young Adults, Paramount Personnel, Youth Pathways, Dandenong Valley Job Support and Certificates 1 and 2 in work and transition education run by Chisholm TAFE) and the development of a centralised resource area that coordinated or communicated with all stakeholders (teachers, parents, student) would greatly expedite the process and aid these young people in achieving their potential.

Informed optimism can pervade post-school transitions for high school students with disabilities and consequently enhance life-long experience. **TEACH**

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